EXPLORING PERSONAL TRUTH: STAGING

A THEATRE OF THE BODY

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the performer's idiosyncrasy as a source of inspiration to (re)create a theatre of bodily experience. Conducting my own research in performing arts, I often experienced a theatre that was lacking physicality. On the contrary, dance theatre captivated me by allowing the body of the performer to tell its story in front of an audience. Revealed in its pure presence, the body and physicality of the performer shows a side of human beings that is often hidden, confined, or even repressed.

My personal performing experience within a place of inner truth has largely influenced the way I wanted to collaborate on a creative process. *Le Jardin*, my thesis piece, was created with five female performers. Sharing their history/memories and world views through physicality, the performers created a map of metaphors and moving image in which the body could live. Pushed to the limits of human possibilities, each body generated a singular meaning, which showed the complexity of the human character. This thesis shows that in sharing the performers' inner intensity and pure presence, there is a potential for an emotional release, for both the performers and the audience. I believe that it is through the recognition of this theatrical experience that a profound communication can happen.

The nude is bleeding. In a time that resembles anger, I fix arms and legs that always lose their way in the organic body while having forgotten all about the origin of those arms and legs. I operate the body. My profession, known under the name of dancer, is an initiative of restoration of the human being.

– Tatsumi Hijikata.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The act of performing is a descent into the depths of my inner self. It is "a journey to the very limits of human possibilities, a journey into the unknown […] where a number of physical and mental things happen" (Néry, 2005). *The act of performing is a place, when reached, where my thoughts are at one with my body. All tensions have completely disappeared and I can trust my whole self to let go. My body is fully aware and my mind is in tune with it. I dive deep into myself until I reconnect with my origins. I become part of everything before and around me, while I exist solely in the present moment. Despite the stage fright or the pain coming from physical effort, I feel free. I am the dance and the dance is me. I am home. I am revealed, vulnerable and transparent. I am humble, offering my entire self to the unknown, to the audience, not expecting anything in return. While in this state, I find myself most alive.*

My Repressed Body

Anyone performing who feels numb to the stage is not worthy of it. There are no great accomplishments or discoveries without pushing oneself beyond one's known limits. Theatre is a physical place of the unknown from which life can spring, and I am curious to reach it. For a very long time, I was confined by my inner thoughts, my body

paralyzed in front of a seemingly insurmountable life. The scariest thing about being alive is confronting one's life. Yet, what scared me the most also captivated my curiosity and fired my desire. This inner conflict led me to study acting and performing arts theory at the University of Artois (France). Acting was for me a chance to inhabit a multitude of lives and experiences. During my theatre studies, I remember a key moment that made me rethink my acting skills. In a workshop led by a professional director, my cohorts and I were asked to stand up, walk to a chair, sit, and pour ourselves a glass of water. When finished, we would be invited to end the scene. As instructed, I went to the table, sat, poured myself a glass of water and as nothing else was happening, I nervously started 'acting.' By acting, I mean that to justify my presence at the table, I built a story in my head; to reveal the story, I started amplifying my gestures, making obvious for my 'audience' that I was waiting for someone, that I lost patience, that I was ready for the check…

"No! Thank you," said the director, inviting me to leave the scene. This very basic exercise took me years to grasp. Eventually, I started to realize that I was removed from the experience happening in the moment. Secluded in my head, I was creating a fictional story and analyzing my every word and move. I was watching myself perform the character I had created, a caricature, when in fact I was only asked to be myself. I had no idea how to act from a place of authenticity or how to reach it. More comfortable behind the stage than on stage, I stopped acting and became a director's assistant. In this position, I discovered that most directors and/or actors I met were working and performing from habits, lost in the psychology of the characters, focused on the character's speeches.

From my personal acting experience to my work as an assistant, contemporary French theatre became for me the affliction of textuality and archaic traditions. Directors and actors were the instrument of the almighty text. How unbelievable, boring, "deadly" this form of theatre was, as British director Peter Brook (1996) explains in his book *The Empty Space*:

> In France there are two deadly ways of playing classical tragedy. One is traditional, and this involves using a special voice, a special manner, a noble look and an elevated musical delivery. The other way is no more than a half-hearted version of the same thing. Imperial gestures and royal values are fast disappearing from everyday life, so each new generation finds the grand manner more and more hollow, more and more meaningless. This leads the young actor to an angry and impatient search for what he calls truth. He wants to play his verse more realistically, to get it to sound like honest-to-God real speech, but he finds that the formality of the writing is so rigid that it resists this treatment. He is forced to an uneasy compromise that is neither refreshing, like ordinary talk, nor defiantly histrionic, like what we call ham. So his acting is weak and because ham is strong, it is remembered with a certain nostalgia. (p. 10)

I was the young actor described by Peter Brook. I was eager to act from what is called 'truth' but I did not know how to escape the dusty tradition of *la Comédie Française* and other conservatories, which had preserved the same acting method for centuries. While acting, my body would stay barren, 'amputated' from itself, only reaffirming the discourse taking place in my head instead of following its own trajectory. I would imitate life instead of letting it happen. Acting, as I understood it, was an isolated psychological process, but I was craving a lived and shared experience. I was longing for a theatre whose mission was not to imitate life, but to live and share life on stage. I started to recognize that the act of performing could be charged with the most enigmatic and paradoxical state of being and I was determined to investigate it. Where does life come from in theatre? Where does authenticity reside inside the performer? How does one conjure both on stage?

As an audience member, I always thought that the best theatrical performances are often discerned through the actor's presence. Presence is what we recognize happening through the body as a "'direct' physical communication with the actor" (Pavis, Carlson, & Shantz, 1998, p. 285), but it also has to do with the energy coming from the body of the actor. Eugenio Barba and Moriaki Watanabe, theatre anthropologists, define the performing state as a "contradiction and oxymoron: To be strongly present but to present nothing is, for an actor, an oxymoron, a true contradiction […] the actor of pure presence [is an] actor representing his own absence" (as cited in Pavis, Carlson, & Shantz, p. 285). With this definition, I understand that the actor's presence is found in his/her energetic body only when actions and their outcomes are not anticipated. In the space between being 'strongly present' and 'presenting nothing,' the authenticity of the actor can exist. On stage, I wanted to be 'authentic.' I wanted to be alive without having to think of how to be alive. I needed to free my body from my thoughts. I needed to find a language within my body. I needed to understand and listen to my body, a body that I had repressed all my life in front of the many norms that surrounded me.

Reclaiming the Body

In 2007, during a workshop, Jerry Gardner, movement professor in the Actor Training Program at the University of Utah, introduced me to butoh, a Japanese avant-garde form of dance and theatre. Through improvisation exercises, butoh allowed me to find a place of inner truth. I rediscovered the origins of my joys and fears. Facing them, I became alive, more than I had ever been. I was capable of experiencing a sensation of freedom and presence through physicality. Movements came from within my body and

were expressed in a pure way, without filters. I was not questioning myself nor trying to psychologically justify my actions. I was my actions. I was moving, dancing, speaking from my body. Meaning started to emerge from my movements, and I began to uncover my identity as a human.

Unfortunately, by the time I tried to remember what my body had just produced, it was already gone. The ephemeral aspect of my improvisation left me unable to fully express myself. My untrained body would try to remember the experience but would only replicate the movement, like a bone without marrow. My body was learning a foreign language and I needed more vocabulary. I was craving a freedom of expression that would accompany me in my performing state. I was looking for the moment when I could dream in a language that was once foreign. In 2012, I immersed myself in dance training by entering the Modern Dance Program at the University of Utah as a full-time student.

Now as a graduate student, I am challenged by the difficult situation of choreographing a thesis piece after years of training in theatre, butoh, and modern dance. I wanted it to be directly inspired by my path as a way to reflect on myself and the arts in general. The fusion between dance and theatre felt necessary, and I wanted to bring a new perspective to a theatrical language that always felt too limited. By combining both art forms, my task became to develop a physical language without losing its dramatic aspect. I was not interested in being a choreographer in the classical sense, teaching steps to the performers. I would become their mentor, creating meaning from their movements and engaging a dialectic between their emotions and their physicality.

The narrative for this piece was to be inspired from the personalities of the people involved in the work. I felt it necessary that each performer develop their personal

biography inside the movement and inside the piece at a larger scale. For me, the challenge was to keep the life of our findings, and our findings alive until, during, and through the performance of the work. Thus, questions arose: how can I choreograph, or more accurately, orchestrate human beings/performers across a collection of personal discoveries without losing their integrity, freshness, spontaneity, unpredictability, and *truth*? How can I reach and define a dramaturgy of the human body while keeping its authenticity? How can I conjure life on stage in a shared experience with an audience? What does it mean for artists to use the body as a source of language? What are the new poetics emerging from movement? Is it possible to talk about a *mise en scène* of the body? What are the impacts of a bodily experience on an audience today?

Dance theatre or theatre dance is a fairly new term, one that emphasizes either 'theatre' or 'dance.' Does it really need to be one or the other? Through this research, I question what is necessary for the performing body to be/stay alive, and to be able to work from and within a personal biography. Also, I research how to expand the inner truth of the performer beyond its initial meaning, so that truth can be transmitted and read by each audience member in a way that is truthful to them.

This thesis is an attempt to create my personal definition of dance theatre and its modes of functioning. In Chapter 2, I recall my personal meeting with the dance theatre genre and draw the historical context in which it appeared. I offer that dance theatre emerged as an answer to what I call the failure of language, which is a consequence of the two World Wars. From this devastated landscape, I am able to see the necessity for artists from the theatre community to dance, to find new modes of communication. I look specifically at the artists Tatsumi Hijikata, Pina Bausch, and Alain Platel and how they

create a new form of corporeal language through their personal exploration of dance theatre. Analyzing these artists' works helps me understand and define different attributes necessary in the making of dance theatre. From explaining this notion of staging of the body, to its manifestation on stage, I seek out inspiration to derive my own aesthetic in dance theatre. In Chapter 3, I discuss my discovery of dance theatre through the practice of butoh and how it helped me enter a creative process based on a very personal story. From the discoveries of this process, I present in Chapter 4 the creation of my thesis piece *Le Jardin*, performed at the Red Lotus School of Movement in Salt Lake City in December 2015. This piece was created in collaboration with five dancers, creating a context in which to share their stories and voices within the larger scope of the human condition. Through their individual journeys, they were able to express different sides of their personalities, from struggle to sadness, from fortitude to extreme vulnerability. I conclude by looking at the new questions that arose from the performance of *Le Jardin*.

I hope for this thesis to contextualize and open up the definition of dance theatre and the important traits of this particular form. I want for my research to help anyone who wants to create movement and narrative from this intimate and vulnerable place of biography. I want to help by sharing the successes and failures I experienced while peeling off the layers to access 'authenticity' in my work. Through the act of performing and sharing ourselves, I would like to reconcile the spectator with the performer, or more precisely, to reestablish a deep communication between human beings.

CHAPTER 2

LANDSCAPES

VSPRS

In 2006, I attended les ballets C de la B's performance of *VSPRS,* a piece directed by Belgian choreographer Alain Platel. It was my first experience watching a dance theatre piece. I did not know what to expect and I was very curious to see how those two art forms could coexist. To my surprise, the evening length piece was not about dance sharing the performing space with theatre, or the other way around, but it was a total fusion between both art forms. Platel's ability to make the body tell its story in front of an audience made *VSPRS* the most compelling performance I had ever seen. The movements and thoughts of 11 performers merged as one. I was fascinated by the image of these bodies fighting an uncontrollable shaking, which gradually annihilated their ordinary movements. The commitment of the performers was astonishing; they pushed themselves to the very limits of mental and physical exhaustion, a battle between willpower and the loss of control. Throughout the show, I was tormented by whether or not the performers were losing their human character by being unable to control their movements, or if they were regaining humanity by showing a side of themselves that was buried under the world's façade. The continuous trembling seemed to peel the layers of social construct, leaving the performers bare and transparent in front of their audience. They were

individual voices within an ensemble. By the end of the show, their faces had changed tremendously, as if a weight had been lifted from them. I too, felt changed: something in me had been revealed and I had a better understanding of myself.

In a documentary style dance that contrasts with an obvious theatricality, Platel presented humanity in all its weaknesses and contradictions. Despite some horrible critiques in Europe, such as "Alain Platel, go home with your horrible impersonation of the plight of poor mad people" Sophie Fiennes describes *VSPRS* as:

> not about mad people but about all human beings. It is about the problem of being a human being. It is about the experience of being in a body and the fight between what we experience psychically and what the body can do. What the body is creating of our emotional experience, so this relationship between emotion and physicality. (as cited in Carré, 2008)

Platel particularly accentuates the constant tensions that exist between people and society. In his pieces, he stages the world as he sees it: a chaotic world populated by fragile but complex wandering beings. For the first time, theatre was speaking to me on a higher level than just my reason. I felt my skin turned inside out, and feelings buried inside of me freed out in the open. I was in shock, desperate but at peace, sad but joyful, melancholic but thrilled, hopeless but hopeful, ... it felt good, like an intense relief. Those sensations made me as alive as the performers: exhausted (like after a good cry) but alive. For the first time, I was having a cathartic response to a live performance. This was the theatre I had been looking for: a theatre of experience. I desired more than anything to be part of it!

As difficult as it is to categorize Platel's work, he shares with honesty that he is directly influenced by Pina Bausch's *Tanztheatre*, which translates from the German as dance theatre. This recent genre that Bausch helped create in the 1970s is mostly

renowned through her work. However, the origins of German dance theatre can be tied back to "the works of Rudolf von Laban and his pupils Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss" (Fernandes, 2001, p. 1). In the 1920s, Rudolf Laban was one of the first choreographers to rethink the relationship of the performer within the space, finding a different approach to the origin of theatricality on stage:

> The moods of expressions of movements have a double source. It will be easily understood that a body and arm stretched high wide has a different expression from that of a body huddled up on the floor. It would be wrong, however, to speak of definite moods expressed by positions, because the dancer can move into any position in very different ways. Suppose he reaches the highly stretched position one time with a soft floating movement and another time with an energetic thrust. It is obvious that the mood of the movement will be different each time. The expression of movement depends therefore on several factors – space, location, including shape, and dynamic content, including effort. (Laban & Ullmann, 1975, p. 44)

What Laban introduces here is the idea that the expression of the movement is a direct consequence of the performers's choices during the time he/she performs an action. This opens the door to a form of performance centered around the performer as subject of the movement instead of being an object of the choreography(/er). During the same period, Mary Wigman created German expressionistic dance (*Ausdruckstanz*) in an effort to break free from the classical ballet form and norms. Wigman's "search for an individual expression linked with universal human struggles and needs" (Fernandes, 2001, p. 3) is later found in both Bausch and Platel's work.

In the introduction of *Theatre and dance, a crossing between modern and contemporary (Vol. 1)*, Philippe Ivernel and Anne Longuet Marx (2010, p. 10) explain that two versions of tragedy share a place under the German expressionistic movement of the 1920s. The classical Greek drama opposes to the *Trauerspiel* (German tragic drama) that deals with the present history of Germany as the remnant of repeating catastrophes,

in a period of uncertainty between two Wars.

Devastated Landscape

I had an academic and theoretical education while studying for a Master of Arts Degree in Performing Arts from the University of Artois. I identify with a European, or Occidental, theatre tradition, which was for a long time synonymous with spoken, narrative theatre, reflecting the Occident's reign under the separation of genres and especially of dance and theatre. However, this separation and despotic hierarchy of the text over all other forms of theatricality (music, text, sound, stage design, and bodies) was not always the primary model for the art form. The word theatre comes from the Greek verb *Theaomai*, which means to see, making theatre a place of viewing before hearing.

From a contemporary standpoint, it is easy to forget the sacred origins of theatre, descending from the earliest dance rituals. In ancient Greece, theatre and dance were both integrated as part of the Tragedy. *Horos* – dance in Greek, also present in the word *Choros* (chorus) – was an essential part of the chorus's actions along with singing, both of which gave the citizen a voice on stage. The combination of theatre with dance was used to serve the Tragedy's plot, but also to lead its audience to experience what Aristotle (384-322 BC) defined in *Poetics* (335 BCE) as *katharsis*: in his definition, "tragedy 'effect[s] through pity and fear the purification of such emotions' (49b27f.)" (Aristotle, as cited in Heath, 1996, p. 25)

According to Philippe Ivernel and Anne Longuet Marx, this point of contact between dance and theatre is also a point of fracture (p. 10): the actors were the only ones able to address with words the chorus, who would answer them back with abstract dances and

songs. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle was already introducing a separation between all the elements that establish the Greek tragedy. The diction ('verbal expression') was fourth in the order of importance, after the 'plot,' the 'character,' and 'reasoning.' The remaining 'song' and 'spectacle' were the least important elements of the poetic as thought by Aristotle. Even though theatre and dance existed under the same entity, a separation between the two art forms was to be anticipated and the segmentation of roles in Greek Theatre paved the way for today's Occidental views and aesthetics of theatre, placing the text before the body, words before movements. Beyond this problem of hierarchy, I was doubting that language alone could sincerely translate human thoughts and sentiments, in other words, the full scope of human existence. How can language fully express what it is to be human? Between my reason and my sentiments, I was torn by what Friedrich Nietzsche would refer to as a duality amid the Apollonian and the Dionysian, order and chaos. Seeing Alain Platel's *VSPRS* was for me the incarnation of Antonin Artaud's ambition, theatre philosopher of the avant-garde, to free theatre from the dictatorial relationship of textuality.

The Failure of Language

Antonin Artaud (1958) was first to avidly oppose this despotic hierarchy in his essay *The Theatre and Its Double*:

> How does it happen that in the theatre, […], everything specifically theatrical, i.e., everything that cannot be expressed in speech, in words, or, if you prefer, everything that is not contained into dialogue is left in the background?
> […] how does it happen that the Occidental theatre does not see theatre under any other aspect than as a theatre of dialogue?
> […] I say that the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak.
> I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of

> speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of the senses as there is a poetry of language, and that this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language. (Artaud, p. 37)

Rooted in Antonin Artaud's revolt against a sclerotic theatre is a virulent reaction to the society he lived in. Artaud comes from the surrealist avant-garde movement that arose from DADAism, specifically directed against a theatrical reality (naturalism) popular at the time. Guillaume Apollinaire, who gave surrealism its name, explains "When man wanted to imitate walking he created the wheel, which does not resemble a leg. In the same way, he has created surrealism" (Goldberg, 1996, p. 80). Theatre already feels the friction between the imitation of reality and the (re)presentation of reality from a different angle.

The theatre of the early 21st century lives under "times of crime," says Catherine Naugrette (2004) in her essay *Paysages Dévastés: le théâtre et le sens de l'humain*, borrowing the expression from German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk who describes the atrocities of modern society. These are the types of monstrosities solely created and provoked by human agency. In this context, the 20th century was considered a drastic point of ruptures and changes, both historical and economical. Naugrette is one among many writers to describe today's society as the direct consequence of the two World Wars and Hiroshima, of the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, politics of globalization, massive unemployment, high ecological risks, and so on. Naugrette considers that the acts of auto-destruction during the two World Wars deeply altered human thoughts. As a result, people started to revoke all previous foundations and ideologies that were governing their society. It translated to the arts with a proliferation of avant-garde movements, the –isms: expressionism, modernism, surrealism, Dadaism,

and so on. Their manifestos deconstructed all previous art norms, and these movements were constantly redefining their own limits. Desperately, by pushing preexisting boundaries, they would create new rules… until there were no more rules left to deconstruct.

"One must be absolutely modern": Arthur Rimbaud's words, precursors of surrealist poetry, are heavy with consequences. Who knows what it really means to be modern in this landscape of destruction? Rimbaud knew that to be an artist, he had to make the sacrifice to live in the uncertainty and wandering, searching for a truth that always transforms and slips away: "I want to be a poet, and I'm working at turning myself into a seer. The idea is to reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses. It involves enormous suffering, but one must be strong and be a born poet. It's really not my fault." Many contemporary theatre directors, like Romeo Castellucci, look at our history saying that in art, and especially in theatre, "there is nothing to invent, there is only things to edit, […] editing is infinite" whereas, "the invention is finished" (PewCenterForArts&Heritage, 2014).

Contemporary society is condemned to look back at the past in order to re-create its own unknown future. This concept takes form in Paul Klee's (1920) painting the *Angelus Novus* (as cited in Naugrette, 2004, p. 22); this angel is facing its audience even though, in Walter Benjamin's interpretation, it contemplates from its wide big eyes the ruins of the past. Therefore, it is the viewers looking at the painting that belong to the ruins of the past. The angel, wings spread, is ready to fly away towards the empty background of the painting, towards an uncertain future. It is this uncertainty that has smashed humanity in the heart of its identity. At the beginning of the century, if people felt a certain liberty in

front of individualism, today they find themselves isolated in the daily experience of a certain misery that walks through the world and the world that walks right through them.

In this context, contemporary theatre's responsibility is to show the world as it becomes, to reestablish a dialogue between people and to make them think upon their humanity, which was already Aristotle's core idea in the concept of Greek Tragedy by allowing a feeling of relief through *katharsis*. In theatre, the traditional modes of narration are shaken in response to the drama crisis that has followed the wave of avant-garde movements. "From tragedy to tragic," says Castellucci (PewCenterForArts&Heritage, 2014), theatre is above all an unpredictable, indomitable, and disruptive source of energy. Today, the study of Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), named *Postdramatic Theatre* and inspired from a performance aesthetic, emphasizes the energetic body of the performer, the direction of theatre from text to speech, from speech to voice, from voice to gesture, from gesture to movement, thus closing the gap with dance. "What dance?," ask Ivernel and Longuet Marx (p. 10). Recent dance theatre artists, such as Tatsumi Hijikata, Pina Bausch, and currently Alain Platel, have strived to create a new language that is able to unleash this absolute energy of the body. Looking at a *postdramatic* image of the body, Lehmann says:

> The dramatic process occurred *between* the bodies, the postdramatic process occurs *with/on/ to* the body. The mental duel, which the physical murder on stage and the stage duel only translate metaphorically, is replaced by physical motor activity or its handicap, shape or shapelessness, wholeness or fragmentation. While the dramatic body was the carrier of the agon, the postdramatic body offers the image of its *agony*. (p. 163)

This *postdramatic* theatre, from which dance theatre is a significant aspect, "realizes the intensified presence of the human body" (Lehmann, p. 163). By staging the meeting between the body of the spectator and the body of the performer – "the other" body, those

artists cause the manifestation – the epiphany of humanity on stage. It is through dance theatre that this new image of the body is made possible. Further, Lehmann really explains the new poetics emerging from the movement and what it means to use the body as a new form of language:

> it articulates not meaning but energy, it represents not illustrations but actions. Everything here is gesture. Previously unknown or hidden energies seem to be released from the body. It becomes its own message and at the same time is exposed as the most profound *stranger of the self*: what is one's 'own' is *terra incognita.* This is evident in ritual cruelty exploring the extremes of what is bearable or when phenomena that are alien and uncanny to the body are brought to the surface (of the skin): impulsive gesticulations, turbulence and agitation, hysterical convulsions, autistic disintegrations of form, loss of balance, fall and deformation. Just as the new dance privileges discontinuity, the different members (*articuli*) of the body take precedence over its totality as a *Gestalt*. (p. 163)

I was eager to enter this *terra incognita* within my own body and find for myself this form of *Gestalt*. My entry point into the world of dance theatre was through the study of butoh.

CHAPTER 3

BUTOH

A Dance Born From Darkness

Butoh was born in the late 1950s in reaction to nearly a decade of American occupation of Japan, which was the result of Japan's defeat in World War II. In between the two World Wars, the strong axis between Berlin and Tokyo played an important role in the influence of Japanese modern and avant-garde art. Many cultures and art forms helped shape butoh. The most direct influence came from Japanese artists who had been exposed to German Expressionist modern dance or *Neuer Tanz*, and dancers/choreographers such as Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban. Butoh artists wanted to invent a new order in the Japanese culture and society by deconstructing the social norms and codes existing at the time. Butoh's creators Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno wanted to return to the origins of Japanese culture, to what was necessary to uncover the deepest hidden human emotions.

The word butoh was created by the union of two words: "*Bu"* comes from buyo, a Japanese traditional form of dance and pantomime, and "*Toh*,*"* to stamp/step on (Aslan, Amagatsu, & Picon-Vallin, 2002). The meeting of those two words creates a new world of possibilities with its own context and meaning, something mysterious and always evolving. In comparison, the term dance theatre could seem restricted, attached to the

meaning of those two words: when movement meets text. If comparing the American modern dance to butoh during the 1950s and 1960s, when butoh was created, we find that much of American modern dance at the time was turning away from the narrative form of classical ballet, investigating movement for movement's sake, and turning it into pure abstraction. Butoh on the other hand is created from "natural," ordinary movements and convey a deep emotional content and human relationship to its viewer. For example, Tatsumi Hijikata created work inspired from his life in northern Japan and the extreme conditions he was living in. His dancers walked for hours in the same fashion, like rice farmers: knees bent to the lowest and extremely slow walk while reaching their arms in the air. Butoh has been described as "shocking, provocative, physical, spiritual, erotic, grotesque, violent, cosmic, nihilistic, cathartic, mysterious" (Dils, 2006, pp. 376-378). It rarely fails to provide a strong and unique emotional experience. People seem to either love or hate it, but it hardly encounters indifference. Through butoh, I wanted to see what would change for me. I wanted to explore and understand the way I move and what moves me. Would it open the door to new possibilities, a new way for me to communicate through my body?

Finding My Own Dance

In 2008, I went to Japan to study at the Kazuo Ohno dance studio with Yoshito Ohno (his son). The first and most valuable lesson Yoshito taught was that butoh was a singular form of expression without a specific technique attached to it. Both Hijikata and K. Ohno had created their own style of butoh. "Do not try to replicate it, you have to find your own butoh", said Yoshito. I was interested in butoh because I felt compelled by its

origins, rawness, and immediate emotional impact, but not being Japanese, I did not share the same culture and/or values. It felt necessary to find what butoh meant for me without risking the appropriation of a cultural movement that was not mine. I had to go home and journey back to my own origins. During many butoh improvisations and exercises, I found a way to let unknown relics of past experiences express themselves through my body in motion. The repetition of movement, the durational improvisations, helped the movement precede my thoughts. I was able not to judge myself but to exist fully in the moment, responding to my body and the environment around me. My body and mind began to work as one and I started to uncover feelings and personal meaning that I never knew existed. I remember a significant exercise directed by Jerry, in which I realized this experience:

The Weight of a Paper Flower

Make a flower, the most beautiful flower, out of this tissue. Hold it in front of you – not too tight, you might break it – not too loose, or it might fall. In the distance, someone you love – you are walking towards them. Be low on your legs, almost in a sitting position. Advance slowly. Extend your arms in front of you! Don't drop the flower! You are crushing your flower! …"

This exercise continues for 10, 20, 30 minutes, an hour!

My body trembles, shakes, sweats, cries. I place all my frustration in my flower. I enter into a dispute with myself: I cannot tarnish my object of love with feelings of anger and frustration! The flower slowly becomes the container for all human's emotions and paradoxes. I surprise myself by placing in it sentiments that I was keeping locked deep

inside of me. As they become the flower, the flower becomes heavier to carry and impacts my body as I drop lower on my knees. I feel as if I am walking through quicksand. Suddenly, Jerry's voice falls on me like thunder and it shakes me so hard that I lose my flower before I could give it to anyone: "NOW dance! this is YOUR dance!" he says.

I listen to my body, stiff from the shock received. Imperceptible movements first arise from the space in my body (organs, bones, cells). Words no longer exist, but through the body, they are transformed in an absolute energy that erupts to the surface. My body is present standing on its own as a bridge between the inner and outer space. Everything becomes visible, felt; my skin, organs, and bones are now transparent revealing the story inside, ancient.

(Re)visiting My Past

I am a quiet and sensitive child lost in a world I can barely describe with words. For years, night after night I wet my bed in fear of an army of monstrous wolves chasing me into darkness. I am in a room so familiar that I cannot remember where it is or what it is made of, the four walls closing on me before I can find an answer. Inside, I feel an indescribable pain that comes and goes without notice; I call it "the blues." A pain that does not necessarily belong to me, but fills all the space in and around me. I am anxious, pessimistic, worried sick about the world catastrophes, questioning the sanity of the too many voices in my head. To quiet the voices, I find refuge underwater. The sound of the outside world muffled makes me feel safe and at peace with myself. Coming back to the surface I am scared; I feel different and misunderstood. My mother holds me for hours, trying to console me. My father is downstairs drowning himself in television. He works;

she stays home. He does not know how to express his feelings; she blames the way he was raised. She always fills the silence he creates, and this silence is very heavy on me. I hold my breath and lock those feelings away. I resist, suppress, bury my emotions; I bury them deeply. The constant stress and anxiety attack my body from the inside. The only cure is to dance.

My body, once amputated from itself, is total, reclaimed, fully aware through each step of the path that led it to be here, now. It carves meaning into the space, like a resurrected memory that dates back a million years. My presence is unique, always changing, yet a familiar place of coming together. It is a vulnerable place, yet I feel powerful. From this dive into the depth of my consciousness, I began to dance for the very first time. I had never felt as true to myself, committed, knowing and owning every gesture I made. I be(came) authentic, transparent, fading away from my ego. This is where years of emotional repression and my inability to act with sincerity converged in one time and space. I was finally capable of understanding the feeling of being present through the (re)presentation of my own absence. I was finding an emotional release and sense through the practice of butoh, which helped me understand myself from a new standpoint: a theatre of bodily presence and experience.

My Bodily Memory

Following my revealing movement/memory experience, I found it necessary to see how I would translate it into a creative process. In 2012, I was commissioned to work on a human portrait for the anniversary of D-Day (June 6, 1944). It was the perfect opportunity to create a movement portrait of my grandfather, a World War II veteran,

who had died a few years earlier. The piece created, *Portrait de Juin* (Translates as 'Portrait of June'), raised questions I had about the transmission of memories between generations, and the transmission of my grandfather's memory to me. When living witnesses of World War II were disappearing along with their stories, I wanted my grandfather's memory to live once more through my body in a movement piece created and sourced from my butoh training. The creative process provided a way for me to return to and cope with my origins. The problem was, my grandfather rarely spoke to me about the war, or the man he had to become, the same man he later had to 'bury' in order to have a family. To conjure his memory, I interviewed my grandmother. Going through a genuine stream of souvenirs, her silences revealed sides of him that had been kept in the dark. How do you create out of darkness, out of the silence? I always believed that I was the consequence of my grandfather's actions. In this life that I had inherited from him were pieces of information, relics of emotions that belonged to him, and I wanted to create a context for my body to bring them to life.

Roger Mahou is born July 5, 1916, in a small village of Eastern France. He is an unwanted child and a consequence of World War I, a 'bastard.' At the age of 18, he joins the army in Morocco to escape his destiny, as his step-father has tried to kill him multiple times. In 1939, after 4 years of military, he comes home to the Second World War. He has no choice but to fight for his country and joins the Zouaves battalion. He endures detentions in German work camps from which he manages to escape twice until his last imprisonment in a Stalag. It is the end of the war and he is freed, but beat up and starving. He returns to his village, to being a bastard again. From a profound sense of pity, my grandmother marries him. They become involved in the Catholic church across

the street. My grandfather goes every day to ring the bells and prepare the church for service: his daily ritual of penitence. Their five daughters are raised in difficult conditions but with love. Troubled by illnesses due to the fumes he breathed during the war, he spends a lot of his time in hospitals. Despite all the horror, pain, and suffering, he always keeps faith in life, the life he passes onto me. He dies at the age of 89, grandfather of 10 grandchildren.

As in all butoh, *Portrait de Juin* revolved around a deep sense of pain and suffering. One could say that my grandfather's life was a drama. Yet we live in a world where everyone has to fight their own battle, so how do you tell an audience about pain and suffering? Butoh had taught me to present it through my body and its immediate experience on stage. Making my personal experience available in order to invoke my grandfather's, and maybe other's, pain and suffering. To work from a personal to maybe a more universal meaning.

Portrait de Juin was made of three scored sections. All sections told a story, pieces of memories both abstract in my thoughts and very concrete through my movement:

La Java

I am desperate, standing among the ruins of a village destroyed by war.
I suffer from diarrhea, the rain pouring on me.
Nothing can be done. The desire to do something disappears in the fine air.
This state becomes a wall. The wall transforms into faces of a family portrait.
The faces vanish into the swamp of my body.
My body surfaces out of the swamp, in the form of the Black Pegasus of Redon, embracing darkness. The calling cry of a magpie pierces the silence.
I am back in a fully burnt body. I wander in a blazing orchard signaling through the flames.

I wrote the text above for the closing section of *Portrait de Juin*. Each section had a

written paragraph inspired by personal memories, images, and fears. It helped me explore the somatic experiences of those images and words. If I was thinking "wall," I would produce a certain gesture, telling something from a body that was a concrete wall between me and the elements, me and my organs, me and the audience. I staged this wall from my body, as a vessel for my thoughts to incarnate those images. This method is known as *"Butoh-Fu"* developed by Yugio Waguari, a disciple of Hijikata (*Butoh Kaden*, 1998). "Fu" means Score in Japanese. For the performance, I had to forget the meaning behind those written words. I let images come to me, the meaning gets (re)created for the first time, transposed, transcended within my body in movement, within the dance. I tell the story of my own presence, through my tangible body. I was able to confront my own pain and suffering, tapping its source, and I was finally able to find peace with it and cope with the death of my grandfather.

CHAPTER 4

LE JARDIN

"Don't Forget to Water the Artists" – Concept

After my personal experience creating and performing *Portrait de Juin*, I wanted to investigate how this type of personal process would function on a cast of people. I was ready to try to work with others and share my ideas and questions.

Le Jardin means "the garden" in French. I first thought of this title reading Belgian festival director Frie Leysen's (2015) speech, *Embracing The Elusive,* in which she denounces the conditions artists live in in contemporary Western society. Leysen asks her audience:

> Why the arts? Why do we need them so much? While we are all running around, busy doing things, the artists decide to stand still, to look closely at us and the societies we have constructed – at how we have organized ourselves. They look, analyze, reflect and criticize. And develop visions of what is and what could be. Their visions are often eye-openers, electro-shocks, heavy confrontations with ourselves. Mostly painful.

Leysen revived a flame inside of me: what was my vision of the world? What was necessary for me to express and share with an audience? *Le Jardin* is born from the necessity to rediscover the use of the body as a language in a theatre that was, for a long time, mainly focused on speech: a place from which I wanted "[…] *to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us insofar as we are in the world through our*

body, and insofar as we perceive the world with our body" (as cited in George-Graves, 2015, p. 213). I was driven by how the body communicates our experiences of the world with such immediacy and intuition. It does not require a translation from thoughts to words. Signs are produced by the body, direct, raw, and sensate. As did my predecessors and inspiration for this piece (Hijikata, Bausch, and Platel), I wanted to create a physical poetry where bodies think, meet, decide, live, and experience their reality. For this reason, dance theatre seems more suited to describe my work.

Le Jardin experiences the world through the body of five performers, individually wandering while struggling to communicate with one another because of the absence of spoken words. It is a place of self-reflection, where actions equal thoughts. The performers have no other choice but to return to their body and move to communicate in search for deeper meaning in their life. Feelings are guided through a defined structure within the piece, a ritualistic journey that takes the performers through their individual and collective experience of repentance, communion, and finally, acceptance. *Le Jardin* is a place of transition between two worlds where rituals and subconscious images revive a powerful dialogue between our contemporary society and the world created by theatre.

A Physical and Mental Space

Le Jardin was designed to be performed in the round. It was important for me to challenge the attention of the spectator by offering a real experience in which they would partake. By changing the viewer's point of view, we can challenge their expectations; as Tadeusz Kantor, revolutionary theatre director, explains:

> […] The stage has always been placed 'in the middle' 'on the axis' of the spectator, for the performance to be watched, observed. However, it is enough to

> move the PLACE of the so-called PERFORMANCE to the side, to the corner, place it not 'on the axis', and a strange thing happens. The spectator loses 'natural' sight of something that used to be 'performed', or, to be exact, pretended and demonstrated. In the corner it will acquire the features of embarrassing exhibitionism, shameful dealing not meant for the spectator, completely independent, STRANGE and self-sufficient! which [sic] does not require the presence of the spectator. (Leach, & De Montfort University, 2012, p. 256)

What most interested me in Kantor's endeavor was the aspect of reality (re)-discovered when the performance is watched from a new angle. I believe that the performing space needs to create its own reality, encouraging the audience to leave the reality they came from to enter and experience a new one.

Le Jardin was performed at The Red Lotus School of Movement, December 4th and 5th, 2015. The building holds a bare performing space, absent from any theatrical signifiers, except for some light instruments on the ceiling. This empty space was a place with no rules, where anything could be possible. I signified the garden by placing a pair of nude colored rubber boots and a vintage metal watering can in one of the four corners of the performing area. The Red Lotus offered the perfect environment to step away from a classical way of seeing theatre from a frontal point of view. The traditional proscenium stage as we know it today refers to "the wall that separates the stage from the auditorium and provides the arch that frames it" (Proscenium, n.d.). I wanted to cancel this idea of separation that is expected and in which the audience gets to feel very comfortable. The Red Lotus, with its caved architecture, offers seating around three sides of the performing area. These sitting positions amplified the idea of risk taken by the audience as they were sharing, in proximity, the space with the performers. The audience was no longer hidden in the dark, but was able to look at the other, performer or audience member sitting across, in the eye. The audience became an active participant of the piece, a spect-actor

who took decisions on what, where, and who to look at, knowing that it was impossible to see it all. The experience of the spect-actors becomes subjective. They create their own meaning and relationships, making connections between their lives and what they see and feel coming from the performers, as described here by one of my former students after she watched the performance:

> I ended up sitting in the far corner of the stage, right next to where the boots were placed. That was actually really interesting because it gave me a very unique perspective of the piece. I think it would have been interesting to see the piece multiple times from different perspectives […] I think it may have caused me to interpret the piece differently, because I would most likely have focused on different dancers, and would possibly have seen a different story. (Vordos, 2015, p. 2)

The Red Lotus School of Movement is located in a historical building constructed in 1910. It houses classical martial arts training while the upstairs serves as a Buddhist temple. The history of this building had a great impact on the construction of a mental space for the performers to live in. First built as a 5th Ward Meeting House for the LDS church, it ended up as an escort club before Jerry Gardner and Jean LaSarre (current owners) turned it into its present use. The Red Lotus is a living proof of humanity's many puzzling faces; something that was at the core of my exploration for the creation of the piece.

A Spiritual Place of Contradiction

As the living memory of the space, my past was attached to a certain spiritual path. I was baptized in the Catholic Church. My parents did not question the tradition that was passed onto them even though they were nonpracticing. Visiting churches was a family tradition. I have always been fascinated by the architecture, the arts, the rituals taking

place… but must of all, the pain and suffering juxtaposed to the sacred and holiness of the space. I remember being tormented by images of martyrs and Christ on the cross – the stations of the cross – in contrast to a beautiful and complex architecture lit by colorful stained glass windows. The religious space presented a duality within myself that I was not ready to understand, but that I could feel. I wanted to regain this sentiment through theatre: *Le Jardin* was to be a beautiful and startling place by creating this experience of duality: being dangerous and peaceful, selfish and selfless, painful and joyful. The piece created a place where the performers and their audience are alive, wandering through a labyrinth of actions that trigger thoughts and sensations, pondering for meaning, like decrypting bodily hieroglyphs.

For the piece, I was looking at Hieronymus Bosch's (ca. 1450-1516) painting *Garden of Earthly Delights,* in which I could see the depiction of humanity's complex traits. The theme of this triptych is human evolution: from God's introducing Eve to Adam, to humans enjoying the delights of the earth, and finally the gates of hell and punishment. Bosch's painting is compelling in all of the details that act all together in a very charged environment of colors, actions, and contradictions. It is overwhelming to look at, and to try to understand all at once, it is impossible. The painting remains a mystery of interpretation and yet triggers my imagination. I can lose myself in it trying to create stories, relationships, and meaning out of all those scenes. That was exactly what I wanted to accomplish in my work on stage: an overwhelming superposition of actions that isolated do not provide much meaning, but colliding in the eyes of the viewer could create powerful stories and unknown meanings (even for me as the director/dramaturg).

Le Jardin is a place from which I can question and challenge my faith. Not a religious

faith, but a faith in humanity. Life is a beautiful and precious gift. Faith can be easily challenged in the current landscape of climate changes and social inequalities (and even more now as a new American president was elected in November 2016). I am conscious that in this landscape, I am often part of the problem, more than the solution. I am scared of losing my faith in others, in myself. To balance a selfish existence, I feel the need to give myself to others. My offering is through making theatre and the creation of *Le Jardin*. I was seeking people with whom to share this philosophy. I was interested in working with people who could honestly approach this place of duality in each of us, in working with people who were mysterious but transparent. Most importantly, I wanted people willing to expose their vulnerability, ready to perform from and with humility.

The garden became a metaphor for life: nothing grows unless time and energy, even struggle, is put to tillage. Who knows what will (be)come? As the gardener, the five performers would work very hard not knowing the outcomes of their work: they were to be selfless, which was a trait of humanity in which I was deeply interested for my work. In today's society where people often need instant gratification, I find that quite remarkable, admirable, and rare. I based the creation of *Le Jardin* on Saint Francis of Assisi's prayer:

> *Lord, O Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.*
> *Where there is hatred, let me show love.*
> *Where there is trespass, let me show forgiveness.*
> *Where there is disagreement, let me show harmony.*
> *Where there is mistake, let me show truth.*
> *Where there is doubt, let me show faith.*
> *Where there is despair, let me show hope.*
> *Where there is darkness, let me show light.*
> *Where there is sadness, let me show joy*
>
> *O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek*
> *To be consoled as to console,*

To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved, as to love,
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in forgetting that we find ourselves;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

This prayer became a moral contract bonding the five performers to myself, the creation, and the audience. Throughout the work, it kept reminding us of what we were trying to accomplish and what was at stake. It became a pillar of trust, the trust we needed in one another in order to create this work. This prayer was finally a place of departure to visit the paradox that defines human character: never black or white but a grey area of complexity.

The Making of *Le Jardin*

To show the many layers of human complexity on stage, I decided to look closely at each of my performers, and with their help, choose their most defining character at the moment of the making of the piece. The main exercise that served to choose those traits was what I call the *walk of truth*:

In the studio: we define a stage and a performing area. One person decides to be on stage, the rest sit as an audience. The person stands in the upstage corner, back turned to their audience. When ready, they turn, stand for a moment, and then decide to move downstage to face their audience. I told the performers to stay there until they start experiencing a certain discomfort, that's when they need to stay longer. Passing that threshold, things usually start to happen to the person, subconscious movements of discomfort; sinking into the body, eyes wandering, blushing, and so on. After experiencing this, and only then, the exercise ends and the person can go back to where

they started, the walk back to that point still being part of the exercise.

After, the person sits in front of their audience who discuss what they noticed: first objectively, describing pathways, pace, body positions, and gestures; then subjectively, sharing how they felt about what they saw and why they felt that way.

This exercise helped us uncover patterns and habits, and access a memory that lives in and expresses itself through the body: our biological biography. From understanding this new awareness, we started shaping a different character for each performer: the Dedicated, the Trustful, the Unapologetic, the Melancholic, and the Insecure. Each of these characters are double sided and can be seen as positive or negative: too much dedication can get in the way of other aspects in life, but dedication is necessary in order to accomplish anything. Altogether, those five attributes represented the complexity of human character and emotions present in *Le Jardin*.

After long hours of movement improvisation based on those characters, the performers created solos that became the movement essence of those personalities. The 'essence solos' were to be the mask imposed on them by society. I asked the performers to imagine the performing space as their living purgatory in which they would repeat their solo as an act of redemption – a place where through repetition, they were to address and confront the pain and suffering in their lives. As Platel beautifully said in an interview, "suffering is part of the human condition. It is in this suffering and its recognition that we are all equal and that real and profound communication can happen" (Platel & Cope, 2010, p. 420). These hard feelings are difficult to acknowledge and/or share. A lot of people decide to ignore them. For instance, when someone asks "how are you?" they usually expect to hear "I am fine, thank you!" We rarely answer by what we

are truly experiencing at that moment. Pain and suffering was to be manifested through and out of the performer's body and shared with the audience.

Throughout the piece, absence is a powerful tool that triggers imagination. From the absence of form (empty space) to the absence of focal point (no proscenium), I was hoping to create a theatre of experience for both the performers and the audience, and renew a sense of communication through sensation.

Inside the Performance

Repentance

Le Jardin begins with the five performers standing at different edges of the space, dimmed in a soft lavender light. A song from the band Bongwater (1990), called *Folk Song,* seems to pull the first performer into the space. Ann Magnuson (lead singer) shares her views of the world, vomiting a long pile of crude, frank, even shocking words. "*I met an anarchist in Tompkins Square Park, He was an angry man, spinning words so dark, He called for death to rich men, death to Yuppies too, Death to art fags, bourgeois blacks, death to landlord Jews!*" The first performer, the 'dedicated,' knits the space around her with big arm gestures, precisely connecting spatial points to each word of the song. She is stuck in an ongoing, never-ending task (this was her "essence" solo), leading her through space in complicated pathways.

Soon, *Le Jardin* becomes a busy conglomerate of signs. As the rest of the performers join the 'dedicated' one by one, wearing colorful pedestrian clothes, they crowd the space with their own "essence" solos. The 'trustful' falls into the space eyes closed, following the lead of her own body taking her to places; the 'unapologetic' jumps into the space and

twists with assertiveness, her arms like a tornado; the 'melancholic,' out of balance in a forward penché, is sucked into the space; the 'insecure' walks around everyone as to carefully keep them contained and separated from the audience. The words of the song juxtaposed to the movements of the performers, the colors, the lights, create an imprint on the viewer's psyche; it is felt more than understood.

The five performers are now simultaneously stuck in their essence solos. Through the repetition of movements, arm gestures, falls, jumps, walking in circles, the masks the performers are wearing start to crumble, to peel off, and reveal a deeper humanity. It is difficult not to feel overwhelmed by this labyrinthine accumulation of signs, but life can be overwhelming. In his *postdramatic* theory, Lehmann explains that playing with a density of signs helps put in question the 'conventionalized' rules that dictate classical theatre: I was "interested in inventing a theatre where all the means that make up theatre do not just illustrate and duplicate each other but instead all maintain their own forces but act together, and where one does not just rely on the conventional hierarchy of means" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 89). The audience is asked to make a choice. They can share their piece of the puzzle with others, in order to understand *Le Jardin* from a larger perspective, or they can remain in the imagination of different viewing points, only wondering what it could have been to see the performance from another place. A new space, a third space, is created, referring to Heiner Goebbels "as the creation of spaces in-between, spaces of discovery, spaces in which emotion, imagination and reflection can actually take place" (Goebbels, Collins, Till, Roesner, & Lagao, 2015, p. 4).

To balance this feeling of rising chaos, I choose to create moments of meetings between the performers that I call coincidences. In order to create life on stage, order out

of chaos, it feels necessary to highlight moments where the performers would find themselves holding the same position, where one performer's movements impact another, one performer's path opens space for another, one performer's movement vocabulary bleeds onto another. The increasing density of movements in space, high velocity, and directness starts to feel dangerous and increase the tension in the space. Occasionally, a meeting between two performers directs the eye of the audience and gives them images to hold on to. As in life, those moments need to feel unpredictable and authentic. During every rehearsal and each night before entering the performing space, I ask the performers to forget what they know about the piece. I asked them to trust their body to take them on a journey, for their mind to forget about what is coming next and to be fully invested in the present moment while retaining the structure of the piece.

It is a great paradoxical state for the performer to be in. The body of the performers, as the center of attention, becomes a question of incarnation. The body "transcends the facticity of its situation to become not the communicator of meaning, but that by which meaning becomes incarnate" (as cited in George-Graves, 2015, p. 219). The performers are seen for who they are, not as dramatic characters. There is no acting nor miming, they live and give life to metaphoric meaning through their body in movement. In an attempt to define dance theatre, Denis Bablet explains:

> […] The movement does not precede the intention, both are really fused in one another and give birth to a new form, transposed, but with high concrete meanings. The gesture needs to be readable and possess this ambiguity that avoids it to be mime, imitation, caricatures of reality. It starts from psychology but escapes from it right away. (Théâtre-danse: La fusion ou rien!, 2010, p. 2)

Eventually, thought and movement become one: there is no delay between the two, no hierarchy, they both simultaneously have a life on their own. Creating authentic life on

stage is a difficult exercise, especially when we talk about performing arts that need to be (re)produced every night. While the movements of the performers are known and well-rehearsed, the structure/frame around them provides an unpredictable emotional content that performers are invited to explore differently every night. During moments of 'coincidence' or 'missed opportunity,' the performers have the chance to connect to one another without planning their emotional response. It creates around their movements a larger dramatic structure.

The performers are the direct subjects of this dramatic structure. In this configuration, they step away from known choreography or dance technique to invest their personal biography: who am I, how do I feel, what is the meaning of life, what is my relationship to… in this particular moment in time and space. They are given a chance to repent on their duality of character through movement and to transcend their own existence. The performers are addressing and (re)defining their identity, for themselves, for the other performers, and for the audience who is invited to do the same by interpreting the situation within their own sensate experience and cultural history/identity.

Communion

> *Sucking and shopping and sucking and shopping and sucking and shopping […] well... whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever makes you happy, Whatever gives you hope.* (Magnuson, 1990)

By the end of the first section, Magnuson's words are on repeat and the tension is at its highest point. The performers, exhausted, individually start to experience convulsions

in their body. The bodies are now uncontrollably shaking, which brings them together in the center of the performing space.

Choreomania has been given many names over time and across cultures: dancing madness, dancing plague, tarantella. It is described in the Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre as a phenomenon that:

> […] could occur sporadically or in epidemics; it was a psychophysical disease distinguishable from modern chorea, and from organic nervous diseases; it was always characterised by an uncontrollable impulse to dance, and a morbid love of music; physical contact with an affected person was not a prerequisite for contracting the disease (the sight or sound of someone already affected could be sufficient); in its epidemic form the attack was generally preceded by premonitory nervous symptoms; and the disease was commonly manifest by physical symptoms, including death. (as cited in George-Graves, 2015, p. 949)

For Alain Platel, there is an interesting parallel between the word 'choreograph(y)e' and "choreomania," which share the same etymology. For this process, I was not a choreographer in the traditional sense, as the person who would teach movement phrases to dancers, but the person who triggers movements in the performer's body and who creates a structure around it. In *The Ignorant Mentor*, Bojana Cvejić, performance theorist, explains that the role of a mentor:

> is not to teach or know the answers but to help "recognize and unfold the place or the moment where the work becomes hot, where it starts moving as if by itself, inviting a feeling of a world to discover there, a sense of pushing the limits of what one can perceive, imagine and articulate." (as cited in Behrndt, 2010, p. 195)

The first section of *Le Jardin* was a manifestation of choreomania. I was very intrigued to understand why this phenomenon existed and what it would mean if transposed in our current society. Michael Lueger, who wrote the article *Dance and the Plague, Epidemic Choreomania and Artaud*, concludes that choreomania must have been a manifestation of people who were feeling oppressed and abandoned by their society.

Those occurrences:

> represent reactions to stress and are attempts to manage stressful situations. The consequences may be a re-establishment of a pre-existing equilibrium, failure to adapt in some way, or the achievement of fresh potentials for action." To view the dancing plagues in these terms would suggest that the choreomaniacs were trying to express a sense of powerlessness and abandonment in the midst of severe crises that where straining the very fabric of their society in which their political and spiritual leadership seemed unable to effectively address. (as cited in George-Graves, 2015, p. 958)

Transposed to the stage, as in Antonin Artaud's theory about *The theatre and the plague*, it becomes a quest for unconditional freedom through a revolution of the body, a transformation through which the body expresses "images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures" (Artaud, 1958, p. 27). The five performers, all female, became the incarnation of the revolt of the body against a patriarchal society that had kept them speechless and under control.

To achieve this effect, the second section pushes choreomania to its extreme manifestation, which is the annihilation of the movement by itself. The performers experienced a movement overdose stopping them from moving in a controlled and voluntary manner. From choreomania to chorea, the bodies were experiencing "the inability to control one's movements and stems from altogether different causes" (p. 27). This process of convulsion/epilepsy takes the body of the performers to the limits of human possibilities. Soon I was able to see the performers access their body from a different place, stripped down from their consciousness, deeply rooted and felt, as if they were peeling off layers of skin to let me see what was under, raw and alive. In visiting extended periods of contractions, the performers approached exhaustion. It opened the door to what exists behind the walls of human limitations, the ego. They were able and encouraged to access memories that lived buried in the body, their biography. The

struggle of the body is the key for the performers to access their personal history, and it gives them a chance to confront and maybe make peace with it. This could be viewed as a performative form of *katharsis* here experienced through the performer's physicality.

Our brain is never free from a thought process, but while visiting an extended period of convulsions, we let go of our thoughts and the body takes over. Rather than being about the intellect, it becomes solely about the experience. This takes some practice. I often referred to this section as a meditative state where the body and mind dive into a deeper self-awareness without losing sense of what is around in the present time. This state brings the performers to a vulnerable place of reveal. I encouraged the performers to let questions arise, – "who am I?," "why am I here?," "what makes me human?" – to even more specific and personal questions. We had no interest in trying to find answers; instead, we wanted to use the body as the space from where to enter those questions through motion. One performer describes the performance as a personal trial she is facing, making her frustrated and tense between having and/or losing control over the situation. Another says that "knowledge is freedom" and decides to put everything she knows on the table so that she has nothing to lose. Sometimes, there could be a sense of resolution found by the performers through the movement. If not, the experience of pondering was enough to give hope to the performers, myself, and to the audience.

By sharing the same trembling motion, the performers create a compelling unity that contrasts their isolation during the first section. In French, the word "*chœur*" carries the double meaning of "choir" and "heart." Bringing the performers together through the experience of chorea was helping me to step away from simultaneous solo dances, and find the unique dynamics present in this group of individuals. It is the only moment in the

piece where all the bodies are attuned, in communion with one another. The performers, united in this trembling, were transformed in a singular, powerful voice, a single beating heart. The convulsed motion is very concrete, yet it escapes from the reality in which it is created to become a profound and impactful source of energy: a primary form of language beyond our use of words, lived rather than pretended. This buildup of energy would be some kind of torture without its release, which brought me to the third section of *Le Jardin*: 'Acceptance.' "*Hello Death, Goodbye Avenue A…*": To those last words of Magnuson's (1990) song, the five bodies freeze while still connected to one another and the only sound of their shallow breathing remains.

Acceptance

> How can you make clear onstage the feelings if we don't see why there is suffering, or anger? I could just tell the audience, but I like them to feel it. (as cited in George-Graves, 2015, p. 220)

"*Deus, in adjutorium meum intende."* The first words of Monteverdi's Deus Atrium from Vespro della Beata Vergine (1610) cause the five bodies to fall to the ground, as if unplugged from their life source. They come right back up in a torment that has not yet ended. They keep on rising and falling. In this last section, I wanted to explore the failure of the body. The performers were asked neither to stand nor to lay on the ground, which caused them to quickly fall and rise, rise and fall: first together and then, as it continues, alone and separated in the performing space. After a certain amount of time, the bodies start giving up. *They lay on the ground flapping like fishes out of the water.*

The monumental music of Monterverdi helped to contrast the falls and rises of the performers. Created in the same era as the manifestation of choreomania, the *Vespers*

were commissioned to Monteverdi by the Catholic Church to compose for the Virgin Mary. I found it fascinating that a man, under a patriarchal archetype, wrote about a woman considered the *Queen of Martyrs* and who is said to have suffered for all of humanity. The five performers, artists, women were transforming into this image of martyr of our society, to show the audience a way towards the redemption of their emotions.

One body remains down while everybody else is pushing beyond exhaustion. The Insecure slowly gets up, disconnected from the rest. She goes to one corner of the space, faces her companions, and puts on the gardening boots and takes the watering can. She watches what remains of those four bodies, emptied out, only breathing. As the music transitions to "Dixit Dominus," the four dancers collect themselves and start pressing on the floor from their shoulders to suspend their legs up, thus rising upside down. This was a precarious position for the performers to hold. They were asked to stay up as long as they could until their bodies fell back to the floor. Only the Melancholic seems to grow, finding the perfect balance to stay up. This movement emerged from a metaphysical image. In Isaac Newton's (2010) translation of the *Emerald Tablet*, which was used by European alchemists in their quest to create the philosopher stone, is written:

> "That which is below is like that which is above & that which
> is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one
> only thing
> And as all things have been & arose from one by the
> mediation of one: so all things have their birth from this
> one thing by adaptation." (p. 2)

In this image and its interpretation on stage, I was opening the way to a certain question for the performers and for their audience. What does it take to see life from upside down? Is it just a mirror of life as we know it or is it a gate opened onto a new world, onto the

unknown?

If one decides to look at the world from upside down, he/she can no longer differentiate with certainty the world below from the world above, theatre from the world in which we live in.

A separation is created between the Insecure and the rest of the characters. The Insecure remains in control while the others have looked into the unknown, ready to accept the uncertainty of their fate and to face their own fears. *The Insecure, watering can in her hand, slowly starts pouring light onto the Melancholic.* The Melancholic is bathed in the light, growing in her upside-down shoulder stand, as if frozen in time and separated from the rest. While the other bodies slowly start sliding, their back to the floor, the attention is pulled onto this concrete, ordinary object. Here the objects become subjects: the boots anchor the Insecure into our reality but transpose it at the same time when light comes pouring out of the watering can, highlighting parts of the Melancholic's body. The objects are taken out of their ordinary context to serve a new purpose that takes precedence in the audience's psyche. *The Dedicated, the Trustful, and the Unapologetic kneel facing the Insecure and the Melancholic.* I asked the three women to adopt an expression inspired from the artistic representation of *La Pietà*: a calm and sweet mourning face. The three women each had a different idea about what an expression of pity looked like, which made it unique to them. *The three women stand and start walking away. At times, they look back. The Melancholic tries to reach them, crawling on the floor. Every time she almost reaches them, the Insecure drags her back to the corner by pulling her by the head. The three women keep walking in the halo of light emitted by the watering can until there is nothing for them to see in the distance.*

The Melancholic is being repeatedly dragged back to the corner. The three women walk backward to an uncertain future, their image reproduced on the wall covered by the shadow of the past, the Insecure and Melancholic in their endless torment.

This image holds the same conflicted power of beauty and tragedy as the sacred space of my childhood. After the show, an audience member asked me why I decided to end on such a 'pessimistic' note. Life is full of challenges. As humans, we cannot understand the true meaning of happiness if we do not experience sadness. The drama always held a higher value of experiencing complex feelings and being relieved through this act of *katharsis*. There was hope in sharing this moment with the audience, in accepting that this difficult separation between the characters was necessary. Some move on, some remain. I could have just told the audience, but I wanted them to feel it:

> Many things we do onstage are real: people run and smash themselves against walls, they fall, they get soaked in water and covered in soil. The contact between the public, it is real. If we experience that moment together in the theatre - that realism - together, then that for me is hope. I am not a pessimist in that way. If we share feelings, there is something beautiful, and that gives us strength. (as cited in George-Graves, 2015, p. 220)

Experiencing this type of feelings is why I make theatre, why I go to the theatre. I am able to expiate feelings that are dormant, neutralized, annihilated by the society around me, which often dictates what is acceptable or reprehended. Theatre is my hope towards an uncertain future, a tool that can help me accept my unknown fate. This piece was a metaphor dedicated to the theatre I passionately believe in.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In joy, man pronounces words.
His words are not enough he extends them.
Extended words are not enough he modulates them.
Modulated words are not enough,
Without noticing,
His hands are gesturing and his feet are jumping.
(as cited in Théâtre-danse: La fusion ou rien!, 2010, p. 17)

I come from the words of theatre. In fear of the words not being sufficient, I extended them until reaching the end of their meaning. I vocalized, even screamed those words in frustration against an archaic theatre tradition that felt insufficient. Wordless and with no possible way to express myself, I started to move. Odette Aslan (2010), in her questioning about theatre and dance, says that: "When dance is introduced into a theatre that forgot about the union of arts, it is to reinsert the body. And when dance uses theatre, it is to recover access to discourse. As if both arts were feeling equally amputated" (Théâtre-danse, p.18). Are they equally amputated?

In this question of communication and ultimately of language, we see that when words are not sufficient, the body takes over as human's last resort to be "heard;" like an ancient memory stored in the body for ages: "Dance theatre uncovers the buried traces of physicality. It heightens, displaces and invents motoric impulses and physical gestures and thus recalls latent, forgotten and retained possibilities of body language" (Lehmann,

2006, p. 96). I strongly believe that the body is a vessel of a history and memories that are stored and passed on by generations. Through dance theatre, this unknown – forgotten – or perhaps buried history of the body can be revealed by reaching limits created upon oneself: it is when the mind enters the unknown and gives up its power that the body reveals its knowledge. In this case, dance theatre starts from the body to (re)discover meaning. The principal question exposed on stage comes from *l'être en scène* (the being on stage) as the main subject of this history. *Être en scène*, says Isabelle Launey, is:

> to find a space of action of which the power, the possibilities, will enter in tension, in power relationship with what one shall call the *mise en scène*. For a dancer, the *mise en scène* is thought first physically, coming from his/her own *être en scène*. Therefore, it has no other meaning than coming from this physicality, this quality of presence. (Théâtre-danse, p. 183)

For *Le Jardin*, I chose to start the creative process drawing inspiration from the five performers' sense of being. I worked from their pure and humble presence. What can be viewed here as a postmodern, or *postdramatic* (as Lehmann calls it), aesthetic and creative process, might in fact be considered as a reclaiming of the body through an art form that already existed in ancient Greek rituals, precursor of dance theatre. With dance theatre, artists reinvent a theatre that explores and expresses the physical reality of the body on stage, or what Lehmann defines as an *auto-sufficient physicality* (p. 95): "the body clears itself from the discursive aspect to be revealed in its internal intensity, as pure "*presence*" (Théâtre-danse, p. 159).

My exploration of the body in terms of 'pure presence' has liberated me from the dramatic norms I was attached to. I did not have to follow a dramatic text or an author. My role was to help free the body of the five performers from known values and what is to be considered 'normal' social behaviors. For this to happen, I asked the performers to

come to rehearsals with no expectations or preconceived ideas upon the work/exercises we would do. At a certain point, afraid of deadlines and in doubt of my own work, my reason took over and I failed to prove myself empty of the same expectations I was asking my performers to let go of. A deep dialogue had to happen between the performers and me to reestablish the freedom necessary for them to dive deep into their body without feeling self-conscious or that they disappointed me. It is from this new-found place of trust and freedom that the performers could explore the extreme limits of their own physicality, redefining the norms around and within themselves. For example, the body can deliberately choose to be affected by gravity, or to ignore it completely. The body of the performer becomes the "other," the outsider: "[…] there is often the presence of the *deviant body*, which through illness, disability or deformation deviates from the norm and causes an 'amoral' fascination, unease or fear" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 95). Pushing this idea further, the body can redefine and confront the social boundaries to which it belongs. Today, the disappearance of social rituals such as carnival – when men and women were allowed to invert or abandon all societal values for a defined period of time – shows a certain lack for human beings to accomplish emotional relief and necessary ritualistic *katharsis*. In this current crisis of the representation of the social body and its places of action, the reinvention of the body through performance allows viewers and performers to witness and experience this emotional relief. The body becomes an absolute authority of power and knowledge. This may be the reason why the '*mise en scene*' of the body is so active on our contemporary theatre's stage. (To name a few choreographers working this way: Alain Platel, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Jan Fabre, Wim Vandekeybus.) At least, this is why dance theatre is so important to me, and seems a potent response to our current

times.

Questions remain to be explored. In the context of the performance, after giving and liberating so much, how do we collect ourselves back to the reality we came from? What type of new memory gets carried from a performing state? How far can we explain this experience with words to someone who was not there?

A few years back, I tried to share with words my experience on stage. I described it as:

> […] a space between the eyes of the audience and the eyes of the performers, and by extension, the eyes of the choreographer. […] I feel lighter. All our experiences have weight; this weight is part of the soul. We gave up something into the space by sharing that tension, that energy. Something got released. We all felt it. We all felt our body going there. For the first time, I was part of them as they were part of myself, as we were all part of the same space. (Alberge, 2014)

The 'weight' I described, I shared with the five performers during the creation of *Le Jardin.* Now stepping back, I realize that their individuality and each formed character was in fact a certain version of myself, a certain version of my own weight. Seeing myself through the body of the performers made me realize that I still had more to discover about myself. Does this introspection ever stop or is there a moment as '*metteur en scène'* (stage director) when we can focus only on the beings in front of us? How much would that transform the creative process and its outcome? Those are the questions I will bring with me in my next endeavor. The making and performing of *Le Jardin* has proved to me that a dialogue and a profound communication is still possible between human beings. By sharing this experience with other people, on and from the stage, I create hope.

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